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Mercury in Skin-Lightening Products:

A Fact Sheet for Retail Store Owners in Illinois

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Pollution Prevention

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Recently there has been much in the news about mercury in "skin-lightening" products. The Chicago Tribune tested 50 skin-lightening creams and found five, manufactured in Asian countries and sold in Chicago, which contained high levels of mercury.

Because mercury is toxic, skin lightening creams, soaps and other cosmetics that have mercury in them are prohibited for sale or distribution in Illinois under a state law. In addition, federal food and drug regulations permit only trace amounts of mercury in cosmetic products sold in the United States.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to inform retail store owners about the state and federal laws dealing with mercury in cosmetics, as well as provide information on the dangers of mercury, how to identify skin creams containing mercury and what to do if these products are found in their stores.

Which skin-lightening products contain mercury?

Despite the health risks, skin-lightening products that contain mercury are available in many parts of the world, and may be illegally imported into the United States. Typically, these products do not contain mercury if made in the United States. Homemade skin-lightening creams and soaps also tend to have high levels of mercury. Recent investigations by the Chicago Tribune, as well as by public health officials in California, Virginia and New York City, have found high levels of mercury in skin lightening creams made in China, Dominican Republic, Hong Kong, India, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan and Taiwan.

Why should I be concerned about mercury?

Mercury-containing products pose significant risks to users. People who use mercury-containing skin creams have been found to have elevated mercury levels in their hair, blood and urine. Mercury absorbed through the skin from prolonged exposure can cause damage to the brain, nervous system and kidneys. Using mercury-containing skin products may also result in rashes, irritation and other changes to the skin. Young children and developing fetuses are more sensitive to the adverse effects of mercury. While pregnant women who use mercury-containing skin creams may not experience symptoms of mercury poisoning; fetuses could become poisoned, leading to brain damage and other developmental problems.

Why is mercury used in skin lightening products?

Mercury or mercury salts may be used as an active ingredient in skin-lightening products to "lighten" the complexion or to remove "blotchy" spots. Public health interviews in New York City have indicated that some people apply skin lightening creams to large portions of their body (e.g., backs, face and neck, arms and legs), with great frequency (e.g., twice daily) and for long periods of time (e.g., several years).

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How can I tell if a product contains mercury?

Look at the list of ingredients. Do not sell or distribute any cream or cosmetic that lists any of the following on the label: "mercury," "mercurio," "calomel," or mercury compounds such as "mercurous chloride." It also makes sense to take special precautions when dealing with imported cosmetic products. Do not sell imported skin lightening creams if there is no label on the container, or if there are no ingredients printed on the product's box or container.

What should I do with skin-lightening products in my store that are suspected of containing mercury?

Arrange to ship the skin lightening creams back to the manufacturer. If the manufacturer will not take the cosmetics back, do not put them in the trash with other solid waste. The creams will need to be disposed of as a hazardous waste.

A list of companies that provide mercury disposal services can be found on Illinois EPA's web site at http://www.epa.state.il.us/land/fluorescent-lamps/.

For more information:

If you have any questions about the Illinois sales ban on mercury-containing cosmetics, please contact Becky Jayne, Illinois EPA, at either (217) 524-9642 or Becky.Jayne@illinois.gov.

For questions regarding health concerns from mercury exposure, please contact the Illinois Department of Public Health's Division of Environmental Health at (217) 782-5830.

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